

MILITARY: House priority is pay, not new entitlements

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A House panel has voted to give the military a 1.9 percent pay raise next January. That would be a half percentage point higher than what the Obama administration wanted simply to match private sector wage growth.

The House armed services subcommittee on military personnel panel also endorsed increases next year in hostile fire pay and family separation allowance, enough to restore the relative value of these payments to what they were in 2004 when last adjusted.

But the same panel, marking up the personnel portion of the fiscal 2011 defense authorization bill Wednesday, signaled the money tap is off for expanding entitlements to reserve personnel, disabled retirees or widows.

In voting to continue a 12-year string of annual military raises set higher than wage growth nationally, the subcommittee ignored pleas from Defense officials not to drive up personnel costs this way and thereby squeeze dollars available for equipment, supplies and other readiness needs.

But Rep. Susan Davis (D-Calif.), panel chairwoman, said the extra half percent raise will continue to narrow a pay gap with civilian peers, which stood at 13.5 percent in 1999 but will be down to 1.9 percent in January.

Days earlier, outside pay experts told the Senate personnel subcommittee that the "gap" argument ignores the hefty gains made to military housing allowances over the last decade. Military pay, they said, already is very competitive, particularly in this distressed economy.

If housing allowances are included in pay comparisons, said a Congressional Budget Office analyst, military compensation has exceeded private sector pay growth by 11 percent since 1982, the year that the Reagan administration declared "pay comparability" had been achieved.

But Davis, in outlining the key personnel initiatives endorsed by her subcommittee, indicated nine years of war allow other facts to hold sway. It is, she said, "painfully apparent that the extraordinary high operations tempo has exacted a high penalty on our service members and their families."

Support for one more extra bump in military pay was unanimous on the 14-member subcommittee. Rep. Joe Wilson (S.C.), ranking Republican, acknowledged "growing opposition" to adding an extra half percent "on the assertion that military pay now exceeds that of comparable civilian jobs. That's a false comparison. I would challenge anyone to find a civilian job that has the same set of requirements and risks" as military personnel face.

As to the assertion that personnel costs are crowding out funds for other defense priorities ---- a case made by Defense Secretary Robert Gates and Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs ---- Wilson said the answer is bigger defense budgets, not "asking military personnel to take less."

Both Davis and Wilson expressed regret that dollars couldn't be found for other personnel priorities involving expansion of entitlements for reservists, disabled retirees and certain widows drawing survivor benefits.

Money couldn't be found, for example, to support President Obama's call again to allow concurrent receipt of retired pay and disability compensation to 103,000 "Chapter 61" retirees who were forced by disability to leave service short of full 20-year careers. Obama has asked that these retirees be allowed to draw Concurrent Retirement and Disability Pay (CRDP), based on number of years served, plus their VA disability pay.

However, his budget request failed to earmark money to pay for this initiative's estimated cost of \$5.4 billion over its first 10 years. The House personnel subcommittee couldn't find the money, either.

House budget rules ---- which admittedly are ignored when an issue is deemed important enough like the post-9/11 GI Bill ---- allows spending on new entitlements, such as concurrent receipt, only if the cost can be covered by reducing some other mandatory or "direct spending" program. No offsets could be found for such purposes this year.

CRDP already is paid to retirees who complete 20 years and have disability ratings of 50 percent or higher. The subcommittee said it would like to expand CRDP, in time, to any disabled retiree, including those with ratings of 40 percent or less. But those dollars aren't available, either.

Nor could the panel find money to lower from 60 the age at which reserve retirement begins, or to end the offset of Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) payments for widows who choose to draw VA Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC). DIC is payable to a surviving spouse if a service member dies on active duty and if the member dies in retirement from service-connected ailments or injuries.

"I intend to attempt to address these issues at the full [armed services] committee mark-up," Wilson said. But offering amendments to make these changes to the defense bill becomes a mere gesture if hundreds of millions of dollars can't be found to pay for them.

When the full committee takes up the bill later this month, details will become available on planned increases to hostile fire pay and family separation allowances. The House bill also would authorize TRICARE to extend health care coverage to dependent children out to age 26, and to restore housing allowances for dual military couples serving on sea duty.

The Senate military personnel subcommittee will mark up its version of the 2011 authorization bill later this month. That panel's endorsement of the higher 1.9 percent pay raise virtually would lock it in for next January.

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